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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the distribution of post-vocalic /r/ in Singapore English as it may relate to social factors, particularly whether usage appears to be perceived as a prestige feature by those who use it. Informants were 21 subjects from various social backgrounds. Three speech styles representing a range of stylistic variation were elicited: subjects were interviewed, read a passage aloud, and read a word list. Frequency of post-vocalic /r/ use in each speech style was calculated, and subjects were ranked by frequency. The effects of other variables (age, gender, peer group influence, self-consciousness) and the phenomenon of hypercorrection were also examined. It is concluded that (r) is a sociolinguistic variable in this group, with post-vocalic /r/ seen as a prestige feature for some speakers. A sound change may also be occurring, with increased frequency of general usage predicted. The reading passage, word list, and data on individual usage patterns are appended. A 14-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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POST-VOCALIC /R/ IN SINGAPORE ENGLISH*

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1. Introduction

The pattern of use of post-vocalic /r/ in Singapore English appears to be undergoing change. In general, the distribution of /r/ in Singapore English is like RP in that /r/ occurs only pre-vocalically. The presence of a post-vocalic /r/ has never been mentioned in studies of Singapore English pronunciation. From informal observations over recent years, however, Gupta has come to feel that some Singaporeans - more specifically, young and high-prestige individuals - increasingly display post-vocalic /r/-usage in their speech. This paper reports the results of a sociolinguistic study conducted in 1989 in response to these observations.

The objectives of the study were two-fold:

(1) to find out if it is likely that more systematic study could show the distribution of post-vocalic /r/ to be correlated with social factors in Singapore, and what these factors might be, and

(2) to determine if post-vocalic /r/-usage is perceived to be a prestige feature by those who use it.

The linguistic variable (r) corresponds to an orthographic <r> in post-vocalic position. (r) may be realised consonantally by /r/ or zero. Our study suggests that the use of post-vocalic /r/ may indeed be correlated with age, sex and identification with a peer group. It also appears that post-vocalic /r/-usage is a new feature being introduced into

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Singapore English in imitation of American English, in most varieties of which the use of post-vocalic /r/ is a prestige marker.

Speakers are regarded as identifying a feature as a prestige marker if they show an increased use of that feature in more formal styles (Labov 1966). Le Page (1985) describes linguistic behaviour as involving 'acts of identity' which result in individuals 'revising' their own verbal behaviours to resemble those of the social groups they wish to be identified with. 'Prestige' in this sense is not necessarily related to prestige on a mono-dimensional social class scale. Trudgill's study of British pop song pronunciation (1983), Romaine's investigation of the loss of post-vocalic /r/ in Scottish English (1978), Milroy's study of Belfast speech (1980), and Mees' observation of glottalization in Cardiff speech (1987) all indicate that certain linguistic features are adopted in imitation of what speakers perceive to be prestige norms for them.

2. Methodology

2.1 Getting the Informants

Milroy's concept (1980) of the sociolinguistic researcher as 'a friend of a friend' was adopted. A particular effort was made to find individuals who used post-vocalic /r/. The interviews were conducted by Tan. The sampling method helped to lower the social barrier between the researcher and the respondents, ensuring friendly and more open and co-operative participation from them, but of course the sample is not representative of the Singapore population or of the English-speaking population. The use of post-vocalic /r/ appears to be an innovation which is at present used by only a small minority of English-speakers. We feel it is more important to be able to see what may turn out to be the beginnings of a change in this way rather than to attempt a study to show the proportion of post-vocalic /r/-use in Singapore.

Friends of the researchers acted as 'go-betweens', informing their own friends, colleagues or relatives about the study and enquiring if they would serve as respondents, explaining briefly what that would involve. Potential respondents had to satisfy only one condition - ability to speak and read English. In all, 21 respondents from various social backgrounds were obtained.

2.2 Selecting the Texts

Three speech styles representing the range of stylistic variation were selected: the Interview Style (IS) for the most informal context examined and the Reading Passage Style (RPS) and Word List Style (WLS) for more formal contexts. These contextual styles were set up to observe the correlation between (r) and stylistic variation. Realizations perceived to be prestigious by respondents can be expected to be associated with higher usage in the formal contexts. Milroy (1980:103f) found that her Belfast speakers did not always move towards the prestige norm when reading aloud, and cautions against always using a linear continuum model. However, she adds that respondents who place a higher value on reading skills than on conversational skills *are* likely to move towards a prestige norm when reading. Furthermore, when readers 'are able to use the spelling system as a reliable guide' (Milroy 1980:106) to a prestige norm they are more likely to move in the traditionally Labovian direction. The Singapore respondents are likely to attribute a high value to reading skills, and in the case of /r/ are able to make use of the spelling system. There is no reason to suppose that they move towards a vernacular norm in this case.

All the interviews and passage- and word-list readings were recorded in the respondents' own homes, offices or other surroundings familiar to them.

2.3 The Interview

Following Labov (1966:137), the interviews were designed to serve a double purpose:

(1) to provide the context for different styles of speech, and
(2) to gather information about the respondents' social backgrounds.

The interview sessions were kept very conversational, and did not follow a strict question/answer order. They were not structured into 'casual' and 'formal' sections as it was felt that the use of post-vocalic /r/ by the respondents in casual contexts would be very low, and that a concentration on style shift to the most formal contexts would be more valuable. This was the case: no informant had more than 17% post-vocalic /r/-use in the interview style.

Social background information from the respondents was elicited in the course of the interview on the following social variables:

(1) age
(2) sex
(3) ethnicity
(4) place/type of residence
(5) occupation
(6) religion
(7) schools/institutions attended
(8) language(s) used with family members/friends/colleagues
(9) interests/hobbies
(10) favourite television/radio programmes
(11) favourite movie star/singer/pop group
(12) most frequent form of transport
(13) places frequented for shopping/entertainment/meals outside home/other services (e.g. hair-dressing, medical, dental, etc.)

All these social variables were tentative categories which it was felt might reveal information about the social patterns of the respondents. As Le Page (1985) and Pellowe and Jones (1978) have noted, acts of identity may be based on very subtle social information.

2.4 The Reading Passage

The reading passage dealt with an informal topic. Instances of (r) in various linguistic contexts - word/syllable-final, pre-consonantal and juncture (linking /r/ and intrusive /r/) positions - were included. The lexical items were not made too advanced since two of the respondents were only ten years old. All the informants found the passage easy to read.

Each respondent was asked to read the passage aloud, as naturally as possible, not in the manner of comprehension reading in school, to avoid the use of a formal slow reading style in which the use of juncture features might be reduced or even absent.

2.5 The Word List

The word list (Appendix 2) comprised 36 items, 18 of which did not have (r). The words were displayed as pairs as near minimal as possible, to draw maximal attention to the presence of (r). The items were also kept simple for the benefit of the younger respondents.

Respondents were told to read the items aloud at a normal pace and as naturally as they could.

3. Analysis Of Results

3.1 Method of Analysis

The percentage of post-vocalic /r/-usage in each of the three contextual styles was obtained by dividing the total number of occurrences (r):/r/ by the total number of (r) and then multiplying the result by 100. In the IS, the number of (r) occurrences varied since the length of the interviews and the choice of words varied with the respondents. Analysis was restricted to 600 words from each of the respondents. Three sections, each of 200 words, were taken from the beginning, middle and end sections of each interview to allow more comparability. Based on the total percentage of post-vocalic /r/-usage in all the three styles, the respondents were ranged on a scale from 'high' to 'low' (respondents are subsequently identified by their rank number), and their social backgrounds examined to determine what social factors were linked with high usage.

3.2 Some teething problems

One problem involved linking /r/ and intrusive /r/ which had to be analysed apart from the main analysis since they were only found in the IS and RPS; including instances of these two types of /r/ would have rendered the data inconsistent. Another problem concerned hypercorrection; there were six such instances - one in the IS (/əmɛrɪkər/), two in the RPS (/vərɔnɪkər/) and three in the WLS (/ðər/, /dər/). These were also analysed separately from the main analysis.[1]

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[1] The phonemic transcriptions are based on the conventions used by Brown (1988b). He 'hesitate[d] to assign phonemic status' to his symbols, but they were certainly appropriate for the pronunciation of the majority of the informants. Our adaptation of Brown (1988b:134) has the vowel phonemes as follows:

[ɪ] *fleece, kit*	[ɔ] *lot, thought*	[aɪ] *price*
[e] *face*	[o] *goat*	[ɔɪ] *choice*
[ɛ] *dress, trap, square*	[u] *foot, goose*	[au] *mouth*

The third problem involved /r/ and /l/. Two respondents articulated /r/ but not /l/ in words where <r> preceded <l> in the orthographic representations (*barely*, /bɛrɪ/; *nearly*, /nɪərɪ/). In another instance, schwa was inserted between <r> and <l> (*Karl*, /karəl/). *Ireland* also posed difficulty as it was pronounced in many different ways by the respondents. In two other instances where the orthographic representations of a word had word-final <l> but not <r>, /l/ was preceded by /r/ in one case (*gull*, /garl/) and replaced by /r/ in another case (*towel*, /tauər/).

There were 4 instances of non-historical prevocalic /r/ from two respondents (*house*, /hraus/; *tyre*, /traɪjə/; *fancy*, /frensɪ/; *favourite*, /freɪvrət/). These do not affect the analysis, but do indicate some of the problems in sociolinguistic research in a community in which variable proficiency in English results in particular difficulties for the analyst.

Intervocalic /r/ occurred as an intrusive element in *about it* (/əbau rɪʔ/), *got out* (/gɔʔrauʔ/) and *sort of* (/sɔrɔf/). It also replaced /d/ in another instance - *Braddell* (/brɛrəl/).

Misreadings were also seen: *tuner* (/tənər/), *Karl* (/karɪ/) and *Ireland* (/aɪslən/) probably because these are less familiar words.

The data for analysis included only the clear-cut cases of post-vocalic /r/.

4. Findings

As can be seen in the table in Appendix 3, there is a small group of 7 respondents (1-7) who are high post-vocalic /r/-users. /r/-usage by these respondents generally shows the greatest rate of increase from the RPS to the WLS, indicating that they perceive post-vocalic /r/ to be a prestige feature in Singapore English, since their use of /r/ increases with the formality of the style. Many of the /r/-users display inconsistent patterns of stylistic variation, and there are two non /r/-users (in the community as a whole, however, non /r/-users are likely

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[ʌ] *palm, strut* [ə] *nurse, (comm)a* [ɪə] *near*
[uə] *poor*

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to be in the majority). Two respondents (12 and 16), who reduce /r/ in the more formal styles, seem to treat post-vocalic /r/ as a stigmatized feature. It would be of interest to establish how prevalent this is in the community. Respondent 12 is ethnically Indian, while 16 is Chinese-educated, but the associations of this pattern remain to be established.

4.1 Post-vocalic /r/-usage and age differentiation

The younger respondents tend to display higher post-vocalic /r/-usage. Respondents 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 were between ten and eighteen years old when the study was conducted (the high scores of respondents 3, 4, and 8 are explained in §4.4 below). The teenaged respondents 1, 2, and 5 follow the pop culture and entertainment programmes which attract a large following among young Singaporeans. Since many of the activities in the Singapore music and entertainment scene are mostly 'American imports', this may be a major source for their incorporation of post-vocalic /r/ into their speech. Respondents 6 and 7 are not followers of pop culture, but identification with American pop culture is not the only influence on the use of post-vocalic /r/. It is likely that the use of post-vocalic /r/ is also associated with groups within particular schools, something which needs systematic study. In the less prestigious schools, informal observation suggests that post-vocalic /r/ is seldom heard, while children from the convent schools and prestigious government schools (such as the school attended by 6 and 7) are particularly likely to use it.

4.2 Post-vocalic /r/ and sex differentiation

Female respondents tend to display higher post-vocalic /r/-usage. Out of the seven high /r/-users, only one is male. Significantly, /r/-usage among the students (1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 15) also displays a clear pattern - all the girls are high /r/-users, with at least 20% higher /r/-usage than the boys. Trudgill found that women tend to use more of what they perceive are prestigious speech forms probably because they are more status-conscious than men (1974: 94). Men are responding to another kind of prestige. The female respondents in our study also seemed to be more confident of ability to use English - all of them responded positively when contacted and most had no reservations about being interviewed at home. Many of the male respondents appeared to

be less sure of their proficiency - three men turned down the request when told that they had to read a passage and word list, and that the entire session would be recorded. Three others preferred the sessions to be conducted 'somewhere outside' while another backed out of the interview at the last minute. The uneasiness of these men might have been due to the difference in sex between the researcher and themselves - despite being a friend's friend, the researcher was not really 'one of them'; in Milroy's terms (1980), they were not part of the same social network.

4.3 Post-vocalic /r/-usage and peer group influence

Peer groups were found to exert a strong influence in the use of post-vocalic /r/ by the younger respondents. Respondents 1 and 2 share a very close relationship (they are cousins, in the same class, and share similar interests), and they display nearly the same level of post-vocalic /r/-usage. Respondent 5 also has similar interests as them and gets along well with them on a classmate basis but she does not belong to the 'clique' of respondents 1 and 2 and shows much less post-vocalic /r/-usage. Similar findings have also been observed by Labov (1972), Le Page (1985) and Milroy (1980) where individuals who wish to be identified with certain social groups adopt the linguistic norms and patterns common to these groups. In Labov's classification (1972: 257), respondent number 5 is a 'peripheral' member of the group to which respondents 1 and 2 belong; in Le Page's terms (1985: 115-116), the English of respondents 1 and 2 is 'focussed' while that of respondent 5 is 'diffuse'. That such a correlation may exist was confirmed when respondent 1 revealed that she had tried to change her speech patterns in imitation of a close Indian friend's English which sounded 'very nice' to her. What is even more significant is that respondents 1 and 2 had taken up Hindu Studies (an interesting choice since both girls are Chinese) upon the persuasion of this Indian friend. Respondents 1 and 2 are evidently under much influence from their peer group. There is no reason to suppose that in the community as a whole the Indians are more likely to use post-vocalic /r/.

Respondents 6 and 7 constitute another peer group. These girls attend different prestigious primary schools, but were formerly classmates in kindergarten; their friendship is reinforced by the fact that

their parents are colleagues. Their closely similar scores may be the result of mutual influence between themselves, or may reflect a more widespread use of post-vocalic /r/ in the prestige schools of Singapore.

4.4 Post-vocalic /r/-usage and self-consciousness

Respondents whose style shift shows that they perceive post-vocalic /r/-usage to be prestigious may be more self-conscious of their speech generally. The three older high-scoring respondents (3, 4, and 8) indicated in the interview that they were self-conscious about their English. Respondent 3 shows the highest rate of increase of post-vocalic /r/-usage - 40% - from the RPS to the WLS. Her self-consciousness may be due to the fact that she is an English Language teacher so she felt she had to articulate her words 'properly'. Respondent 4 also conducts English classes and is interested in radio programmes on English.

The relatively high rate of post-vocalic /r/-usage by respondent 8 may be explained by the fact that he had intensive direct exposure to American English when he was in Washington for six months. Being Chinese-educated could have generated much linguistic insecurity in him, resulting in a particular receptivity to the influence of American English. His phonology was in several respects different from that of the rest of the high-scoring group (for example unlike them he had inconsistent distinction between /l/ and /r/).

4.5 Linking /r/, intrusive /r/, hypercorrection and the instability of /r/

It is significant that the high post-vocalic /r/-users are also those who tend to use linking /r/ (Appendix 3): five of the seven high /r/-users show linking /r/-usage, indicating that they are more aware of the use of post-vocalic /r/. In general, however, linking /r/ is not used to a great extent by the respondents, confirming earlier findings (Brown 1988, Tay 1982) that the use of linking /r/ is not a common feature in Singapore English. There was no incidence of intrusive /r/-usage in the IS. In the RPS, the respondents who used intrusive /r/ are again the high post-vocalic /r/-users. This is anomalous because intrusive /r/-usage is found only in those who do not use post-vocalic /r/. The respondents who use intrusive /r/ and post-vocalic /r/ seem to be

incorporating into their speech linguistic features which are exclusive to one another. This suggests the mixed origins of (r) in Singapore English as well as the linguistic instability of (r). The instability of (r) may be due to the fact that a Singapore English speaker who uses post-vocalic /r/ has reintroduced it to the variety on the basis of orthography, grafting it on to a variety in which it was absent. Other complications may arise from the competing prestige of RP, and from older varieties of Singapore Educated English. Hypercorrection patterns were also observed only among the high post-vocalic /r/-users (Respondents 1, 2, and 7) and the number of such instances increased from the IS to the WLS, further indicating that these respondents are aware of post-vocalic /r/ as a linguistic feature and that they are linguistically insecure with regard to (r), since they 'overcorrect' their pronunciation in their attempts to approach what they believe is a prestige norm. Labov also noted hypercorrection suggesting linguistic insecurity in (r) in his department store study (1972: 64-65).

5. Conclusion

(r) was shown to be indeed a sociolinguistic variable, with post-vocalic /r/ being a prestige feature for some speakers. We may be looking at the beginnings of a sound change. Post-vocalic /r/-usage may increase in time if these respondents continue to use post-vocalic /r/ in their speech and other young Singaporeans are influenced into adopting it. This may well happen, since many young Singaporeans have rather positive feelings towards American English. As respondent 10 remarked, '... our English is mostly ... influenced from America ... we tend to understand American English much better than British ... American English is much better, it's straightforward ...'. The Americanisation of Singapore's youth is well-known at a popular level. For example, a recent full-page feature newspaper in a Singapore newspaper (*The Sunday Times*, 7 April 1991) referred to the Americanisation of young people, citing behaviour, accent, and vocabulary. The feature begins with a profile of an elite school product:

> If you listen to Miss Germaine Tan without looking at her, you would think she grew up in America. The 16-year-old ex-student of Nanyang Girls' High School says: 'I can't remember when I began

speaking this way. It was just one day, I started realising, hey, I sound different.'

The use of a post-vocalic /r/ is also functional in Singapore English as it disambiguates words which would otherwise be homophones in most varieties of educated Singapore English. The pairs on the word list which would be so disambiguated are: *barely/belly, pour/paw, mar/ma, tuner/tuna, dared/dad, short/shot, carp/cup, buyers/bias.*

It must be pointed out, however, that although this study has revealed some socially meaningful patterns in the (r) variable in Singapore English, it was conducted on a very small scale. Moreover, there is no basis of comparison nor possibility of verifying these patterns since no previous research has been attempted on the relationship between the (r) variable in Singapore English and social factors. Conclusive evidence must thus await investigations of a more extensive scope where other factors of a social and psychological nature (such as social aspirations or personal ambitions) could be included, or comparisons made of findings from language and social-network studies between high and low post-vocalic /r/ users.

APPENDIX 1
THE READING PASSAGE

A number of days ago, my friend, Karl, and I, saw this rather amusing incident from my window.

A park-attendant was talking to a guard when he saw a young woman and three children get into a car which was in the garden of a house by the park. He recognized the four of them as Bert's wife, Veronica, and their kids, who had just returned from Ireland, where they had been for a short holiday. Although it was dark, he noticed that the car had a flat tyre and called out, 'Veronica! Veronica!' to warn her about it, but it was too late - he had barely reached the gate of the park when he saw her turn into the street, so he gave up running.

The woman stopped the car at the side of the street, got out and looked at the flat tyre while the children stayed in the car. The boy was playing with his pet spiders, but the girls dared not touch them. The prettier daughter had flowers in her short hair and was amusing herself

with a toy guitar while the other girl was looking at some pattern book.

After a while, a car stopped and the driver offered to help the woman. He rolled up his shirt sleeves and changed the tyre for her. When he had finished and gone, she drove her car back into her garden, got out with the children and went back to her work in the garden - with clean hands.

'The idea of it!' I had exclaimed. 'Fancy coming up with such a trick!'

APPENDIX 2
THE WORD LIST

barely		dared	did
	belly		
pour		short	shot
	paw		
mar		carp	cup
	ma		
guitar		term	atom
	cheetah		
stir		pattern	fatten
	the		
tuner		pierce	piece
	tuna		
tower		Karl	gull
	towel		
prettier		buyers	bias
	India		
Ireland		Jaguars	Hondas
	island		

APPENDIX 3

OVERALL STRATIFICATION BY PERCENTAGE OF POST-VOCALIC /r/-USAGE

Rank	Sex	Age	percentage postvocalic /r/ IS	RPS	WLS	Total	/r/ as prestige feature	presence of linking /r/	intrusive /r/
1	F	18	17.3	34.0	27.8	79.1	+	+	+
2	F	18	15.8	21.3	38.9	76.0	+	+	+
3	F	36	7.1	10.6	50.0	67.7	+	-	-
4	M	35	13.5	21.3	27.8	62.6	+	+	-
5	F	18	12.5	17.0	27.8	57.3	+	+	+
6	F	10	9.4	8.5	38.9	56.8	+	-	-
7	F	10	11.8	10.6	33.3	55.7	+	+	+
8	M	42	4.5	19.1	11.1	34.7	?	+	-
9	M	14	3.6	17.0	11.1	31.7	?	+	-
10	M	18	5.7	4.3	16.7	26.7	+	+	-
11	F	23	3.6	2.1	16.7	22.4	+	+	-
12	M	25	16.7	4.3	-	21.0	-	-	-
13	F	30	2.4	10.6	5.6	18.6	?	+	-
14	F	32	3.7	6.4	5.6	15.7	?	+	+
15	M	18	2.4	6.4	5.6	14.4	?	+	-
16	F	23	8.1	4.3	-	12.4	-	+	-
17	M	22	4.5	2.1	5.6	12.2	?	-	-
18	M	31	-	6.4	5.6	12.0	?	-	-
19	F	28	2.9	8.5	-	11.4	?	-	-
20	M	34	-	-	-	-	–	-	-
21	F	30	-	-	-	-	–	-	-

Notes:
+ post-vocalic /r/ is prestige feature
? unclear whether /r/ is prestige feature
- post-vocalic /r/ not a prestige feature
– non-user of post-vocalic /r/

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